

Dialogue-wise: Some Notes on the Irish Context of Spenser's *View**

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Two recent contributions to this journal by John Breen and Andrew Hadfield on Spenser's use of the dialogue form in *A View of the Present State of Ireland* have added much to the ongoing debate on Spenser's Irish experiences, and have begun to tackle Patricia Coughlan's complaint that "the textual fact of its dialogue form has still not been sufficiently attended to."¹ The first published edition of the *View*, that of James Ware in 1633, advertised it as being written 'Dialogue-wise,' yet few critics have hitherto been wise to the dialogue. While Breen's insertion of Spenser's prose treatise into the established genre of the Renaissance dialogue is important and appropriate, in this response I want to develop Hadfield's tantalising suggestion that there is a highly specific Irish context for the dialogue form, and good historical reasons for English authors intent on treating Irish affairs to adopt this mode of writing.² Picking up on Hadfield's helpful suggestion, I shall argue that there is a more specific literary lineage to which the *View* can usefully be seen to belong, that of the early modern discourse on Ireland, a genre that draws frequently on dialogue as an ideal mode within which to express opinions that may not have been welcomed by the metropolitan authorities. I also wish to introduce an unpublished manuscript that raises the troubled matters of repression and representation central to the Irish dialogue, a text which has not been read alongside the *View* in any systematic way, and one which may in future yield a fruitful comparison.

*Reference: John Breen, "Imagining Voices in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*: A Discussion of Recent Studies Concerning Edmund Spenser's Dialogue," *Connotations* 4.1-2 (1994/95): 119-32; Andrew Hadfield, "Who is Speaking in Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*? A Response to John Breen," *Connotations* 4.3 (1994/95): 233-41.

First though, some preliminary observations. John Breen has done a valuable service by reminding us all of the "generic complexity" of Spenser's *View*. Breen is correct to argue that the *View* has to be read in the context of the Renaissance dialogue, but Hadfield is right to emphasise the form's dominant voice and forcefulness as well as its irony and playfulness. The dialogue form ought not to be used to exonerate Spenser from some of the more extreme views voiced in his prose treatise. There is arguably a "monologism" at work within the "dialogism." Dialogue, for Mikhail Bakhtin, "is not a means for revealing, for bringing to the surface the already ready-made character of a person; no, in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is, not only for others but for himself as well. To be means to communicate dialogically."³ The dialogue may be the most obvious literary form that suggests itself when "dialogism" is discussed, but a monologue may in the end be far more dialogic than a dialogue. Dialogism is a textual principle, a mixing of voices within a single text. A dialogue may well consist, as some critics feel the *View* does, of two voices coming to the same conclusion.

"Aporia," which Breen uses to refer to the rehearsing of contrary positions without assuming one, is not, in my reading, the mode followed in Spenser's dialogue. Whether or not one identifies Irenius as Spenser it is difficult not to feel that there is a dominant line being pursued, and that Eudoxus is in step by the end of the text. The element of undecidability is minimal. Yet Bruce Avery has taken issue with the critical tradition that has argued for the one-sidedness of Spenser's dialogue. Those who claim that "the *View*, though a dialogue, is essentially monovocal, seem to me to miss its most intriguing aspect: its polyvocality, its own contradictory mix of interpretations of, and speculations on, what might be the best view of Ireland."⁴ Avery's reasons for believing that the *View* is polyvocal soon collapse back into the old poet-planter dichotomy:

These contradictions were part of Spenser's own experience. He was both a poet and a part of the political administration of the British [sic] colonial government; he was an Englishman, yet he spent most of his life in Ireland: hence the *View* seems to waver between Irenius's eyewitness accounts, which might square with

Spenser's interpretation of his experience of the place, and accounts which would be acceptable to the home authority represented by Eudoxus.⁵

Or, as Breen puts it: "The dialogue between Spenser's Irenius and Eudoxus is designed to complicate the authorial responsibility for what is spoken."⁶ Thus "Spenser is the authority removed from the text."⁷ This fits in with the contention of Kenneth Gross that "There runs through the dialogue a deep strain of scepticism about the place and power of such structures of order as myth, custom and law."⁸ This is a different perspective from that of the tradition represented by Ciarán Brady which sees Eudoxus a mere foil for the arguments of Irenius/Spenser:

The dramatic pretence of the dialogue form was adopted by Spenser because it was imperative for him to show that when confronted with a true interpretation, a view, of the means by which Ireland came to its present condition, the sensitive, informed and critical English intelligence would concede the complete failure of its own central assumptions regarding the reform of Ireland, as in due course Eudoxus does.⁹

The dialogue suggests an inter-view of sorts, an exchange between an official and a member of the public. According to Helena Shire, it "is a model for our modern form of communication, the interview on broadcast media between the specialist and the intelligent layman."¹⁰

Dialogue, though, does not necessarily imply a polite conversation or discussion. It can take the form of an interrogation. Coughlan, drawing on the work of Roger Deakin, observes that beneath "a superficial diversity of roles" there lie certain fundamental positions, such as "those of Master and Pupil, Objector and Answerer."¹¹ Coughlan argues for "the fictive mode of existence of the *View*, and against the treatment of it as an expository argument." She also shows that Spenser and other English writers on Ireland were working from established literary models and within a circumscribed discursive space.¹² For Roland Smith, Spenser's choice of form is a means of juxtaposing or opposing Ireland's present state with its desired condition, so that the "dialogue form emphasizes his strong inclination to draw contrasts between the reality of his Irish surroundings and the more ideal conditions which his proposed reforms would bring about."¹³

Anne Fogarty, drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, contends that Spenser's treatise is polyvocal, that "the *View* is a form of bricolage, that is, a discourse which is patched together by borrowings from other linguistic systems and sub-systems."¹⁴ Fogarty says of Book VI and the *View* that "both of these works present equivocal and divided accounts of the political ideologies which they wish to sustain. In both cases, the 'other space' projected by the text—the reordered Ireland of the *View* and the consolatory but doomed world of pastoral and faery in *The Faery Queene*—is realized with great difficulty."¹⁵

Spenser's dialogue, according to Donald Bruce, is written in "a form implying open-minded discussion." Bruce maintains that

Irenius, the chief speaker, is neither Spenser's spokesman nor even a governmental recorder, since the *Viewe* was suppressed until 1633, when it could have little effect on official policy. Eudoxus, the second speaker, represents informed public opinion.¹⁶

The issue of censorship is a vexed one.¹⁷ It could be argued that Ireland was both a site of unspeakable Otherness and a place where nothing but the same old story was endlessly related. It was at one and the same time an imaginative scene of pastoral retreat, and a domain characterised by political violence and martial law. It offered an archive of literary and cultural source-material, as well as an opportunity, like that given to Spenser, to combine the roles of secretary and sheriff.

The individual writer found in Ireland a crux of identity as well as a crucible of ideology. The formation of a self—the fashioning of a gentleman—could occur here, but so too could dissolution and crisis. Spenser was very much a man made in Ireland, but also one ruined there. For some critics, including Donald Bruce, the form of the *View* enacts a self-effacement rather than a self-fashioning: "Classical dialogue was a dramatic form, rendered objective by the self effacement of the author, who did no more than record disparate opinions, sometimes opposed to his own."¹⁸ Conversely, John Day sees the author slyly obtruding his countenance upon his cardboard creations: "With only the barest fiction of conversation, no setting, and few digressions, the two thinly characterized speakers move methodically through an agenda."¹⁹ The

hidden agenda is that of a Machiavellian figure who appears to stand back from his work the more to manipulate the reader.

According to Thomas Wright, Spenser, in composing the *View*, may have learned from Bryskett's *Discourse of Civill Life*, in which he had played a part, since this is a text that "offers in a prose dialogue materials presented in Sidney's *Arcadia* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*."²⁰ John Day finds a more immediate influence in Richard Beacon's *Solon His Follie* (1594).²¹ Beverley Sherry has pointed out Spenser's extensive use of dialogue in his poetic works: "*The Shepherdes Calender* is a series of dialogues in the tradition of the classical eclogue . . . In *The Faerie Queene* there is a range of dialogue as well as indirect and reported speech."²² One could add the Spenser-Harvey correspondence and *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* to this penchant for dialogue in Spenser.

Anne Fogarty has argued against the tendency to divide Spenser into planter and poet: "Not infrequently Spenser's work is protected by a grim determination to keep the role of poet and of Elizabethan colonist permanently distinct."²³ However, Fogarty herself may succumb to this temptation. The word "gentle" does not mean soft or pacifistic, just as the word "humanist" does not mean humanitarian. *The Faerie Queene* is a poem littered with corpses, arguably the most relentlessly violent verse in English literary history. The *View* is a model of civility in comparison. Yet critics of the calibre of Ciarán Brady can still ask: "How could the principal poet of the English Renaissance not merely tolerate or even defend, but actually celebrate the use of merciless and unrestrained violence against large numbers of his fellow men?"²⁴ The answer is, of course, with the greatest of ease.

David Baker argues that "Irenius is not Spenser's spokesman in a simple sense, but one voice in a dialectic Spenser constructs between inadmissible scepticism of royal policy and articulations of the official 'view,' articulations Spenser usually puts in the mouth of Eudoxus."²⁵ Ciarán Brady recognises that the Renaissance dialogue was popular in Ireland, and that the form was perhaps inflected in a colonial context:

The use of the dialogue form was by no means unusual in English Renaissance literature, and appears to have been somewhat in fashion in Ireland in the 1590s. But whereas typically the genre was employed as a useful pedagogical technique,

as a means of conveying information and argument in a relaxed manner, Spenser made a clear effort to return to the formally disputational character of the platonic original. Unlike the ciphers of the other Irish dialogues, Eudoxus is an intelligent, informed, if rather two-dimensional character.²⁶

I am not so sure that Spenser differs so markedly from his English contemporaries in Ireland, but Brady is right to stress the disputational character of his treatise.

Having rehearsed some of the positions taken up in recent Spenser criticism on the dialogue form of the *View*, I want to turn now to the place of the dialogue within a wider colonial milieu. The notion that there was, in the early modern period, a monolithic English “discourse on Ireland” is fundamentally flawed. The “discourse on Ireland” is a complex, fraught and heterogeneous genre. Within that diverse body of texts, the dialogue occupies a special position. The Renaissance dialogue in an Irish context raises questions of censorship and self-fashioning that impinge upon English Renaissance culture at large. It was Barnaby Rich, in the context of a dialogue written in 1615, who boasted: “thos wordes that in Englande would be brought wythin the compasse of treason, they are accounted wyth us in Ireland for ordynary table taulke.”²⁷ “Table-talk,” from the cosy humanism of Bryskett’s Dublin residence that provides the pretext for his *Discourse of Civill Life*, to the informed exchange between Irenius and Eudoxus, is the order of the day in early modern Ireland. Here was a unique space in which free-thinking intellectuals could say what they felt, not what they ought to say.

I want to conclude by introducing a contemporary dialogue that remains in manuscript, despite having been prepared for publication around the same time as Spenser’s *View*. The “Dialogue of Sylvanus and Peregrine” (1598), dedicated to the earl of Essex, is endorsed with the name of Sir Thomas Wilson (c.1560-1629), Keeper of the Records in Whitehall, whom Bagwell took to be a stalking horse for Spenser. The presence of an index, coupled with the dedication—a controversial one—suggests that it was intended for print. The *Dialogue*—at 74 folio pages or 40,000 words—is a substantial text. Its participants, Sylvanus and Peregrine—the names of Spenser’s two sons, hence the historical association of the document with Spenser—meet at Westminster and expound upon the vicissitudes

of Irish politics. They mirror the roles played by Eudoxus and Irenius respectively, with Sylvanus adopting the role of the probing questioner, and Peregrine assuming the air of one who is experienced in Irish affairs. Speaking of the *Dialogue* Gottfried writes "the dialogue form—not common among Irish state papers—suggests that the *View* may have served as a model."²⁸ I have already pointed out, however, that Spenser was by no means original in his choice of form.

The *Dialogue* is a composite treatise, a synthesis of divergent discourses divided into four books. The first book (ff. 284^r-312^v) deals with events from "the latter ende of harvest 1597 untill March next ensuing," and focuses upon King's county, or Offaly, part of the Leix-Offaly plantation. Peregrine claims to have little knowledge of Connaught (f. 331^r). Sir Edward Herbert, a courtier and Leix-Offaly planter, closely connected to the powerful "Erle of Pembroke," is singled out for praise on account of a piece of counter-insurgency performed by him around harvest time in 1597. Sylvanus recalls Herbert as "a suter at the Courte" who was well received by Elizabeth, and wonders that such a refined personage "should lye in such a remoate place, and emongst such vyle neighbours" (ff. 284^v-285^v). Sir Warham St. Leger, reported present at Bryskett's house in the *Discourse of Civill Life*, and installed as Governor of Leix in 1597, is accused of aiding and abetting the rebels (f. 293^r). Peregrine entertains his interviewer with a "Gallymauffery of knaves" (f. 304^r). The second book (ff. 313^r-331^r) "entreateth of matters concerninge south Leimpster [Leinster]." The third, covering Connaught and Ulster, is in two parts. In the first, Peregrine produces from the copious "noates" to which he makes repeated reference, a discourse on Connaught in the form of a dialogue between an old soldier and Jacob, a trader in cattle (ff. 331^v-336^v).

This dialogue within a dialogue is followed by a report on events in Ulster entitled "Ulster Occurences," which includes an eyewitness report of the defeat of English forces commanded by Sir Henry Bagenal (1556-1598) at the Yellow Ford on 14 August 1598. It concludes with a list of the officers who perished in this encounter, and is dated 25 August 1598 (ff. 337^r-342^v). The discourse done, Sylvanus comments thus: "How say you brother is it not tyme to top this lofty pyne," to which Peregrine

replies "yee and chope the underwood too, or else all wilbe naught shortly" (f. 342^v).

The fourth book (ff. 343^r-354^r) concerns "matters touching the Comon weale of the Contrie." Peregrine unearths from his private collection of manuscripts a discourse supposedly related to him at his residence in Dublin by an elderly Palesman who dined there with three friends. This treatise is culled from a variety of sources. There is a tension around the perceived threat of Irishness, especially relating to language:

ffirst by reasone of combinacon with the Irish as aforesayde in crept there Language to be allmost generall emongst us, that within a shorte tyme scorninge our oulde Englishe speeche which our Ancestours brought with them at the first conquest thinking it to base by reasone whereof we thought our selves mightely well appoynted to be armed with two Languages so that beinge thus furnished we were able to goe into the Irish countries: and truck with them comodity for comoditie whereas they in former tymes were driven to bringe theires unto us and either bought ours againe with the mony they newly received for it or bartered ware for ware for ware, by an interpreter. Now this kynde of intercourse with the Irish breadde such acquayntaunce amitie and frendshipp betwene them and us, beinge so furnisht with their Language that wee cared not contrary to our duties in ballancing our creditte, to make fosteredg, gossiping, and marriage as aforesaid with them so that now the English Pale and many other places of the kingdome that were planted with English at the first Conqueste are growne to a confusion (ff. 343^v-344^r).

In order to ward off the awesome spectre of a loss of selfhood through "intercourse with the Irish," it was necessary to maintain the kind of "internal dialogue" that proliferated among the literary representatives of the English colonial community.

Interestingly, Eva Gold has suggested that Spenser's own choice of dialogue is determined by just such a fear of a loss of identity:

Spenser's anxieties—his own included—about the English tendency to "degenerate" into the Irish may also account for the use of the dialogue form in the *View*. Why Spenser chose this form has occasioned some puzzlement, for it is not entirely clear why Spenser's material requires two voices. What may be important, however, is not so much the relation between what Eudoxus and Irenius say, but rather the mere presence of Eudoxus. Eudoxus may be there to keep Irenius from losing his mooring to English identity.²⁹

The question of self-fashioning is crucially linked to the need for dialogue, with the colonist having to converse in order to avoid conversion. The process of identity formation is achieved through a deafening dialogue, not with, but over and against an Other whose exclusion from speech leaves a vacuum, a silence, a negative image, and a positively charged space in which the process of self-fashioning can occur.³⁰ The use of the dialogue form by English colonists in Ireland, Edmund Spenser included, reflects, on one level, a fundamental anxiety about identity, as well as an acute awareness of both the profit and the peril of being situated at a distance from the prying eye, and the cocked ear, of the State. It was by an act of self-censorship of sorts, a self-effacement that carved out a communal colonial sphere, that they imposed the binary opposition between coloniser and colonised that effectively ruled out debate, and kept the native Irish beyond the pale of "civill conversation." The planter-poets were in dialogue, but they were talking to themselves.

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NOTES

¹Patricia Coughlan, "Some secret scourge which shall by her come unto England': Ireland and Incivility in Spenser," *Spenser and Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Patricia Coughlan (Cork: Cork UP, 1989) 47.

²Arguably the earliest dialogue on Ireland, certainly the earliest to draw on classical precedents for Renaissance recolonisation, was "The conjectures of Edwarde Walshe touching the state of yrlande" (1552). See David Beers Quinn (ed.), "Edward Walshe's 'Conjectures' concerning the state of Ireland," *Irish Historical Studies* 5, 20 (1947) 303-22. Other examples of the genre are the "Dialogue between Peregryne and Sylvanus, c. 1598," *State Papers, Ireland*, 63/203/119, ff. 283-357, London: Public Record Office; Richard Beacon, *Solon his follie, or A Politique Discourse, touching the Reformation of common-weales conquered, declined or corrupted* (Oxford, 1594); Barnaby Rich, *A Right Exelent and pleasaunt Dialogue, betwene Mercury and an English Souldier: Contayning his Supplication to Mars: Bewtified with sundry worthy Histories, rare inventions and politike devises* (London, 1574); E. M. Hinton (ed.), "Rych's 'Anothomy of Ireland' [1615], with an account of the author," *PMLA* 55 (1940): 73-101; *A Catholicke Conference betweene Syr Tady Mac Mareall a popish priest of Waterforde, and Patricke Plaine a young student of Trinity Colledge by Dublin in Ireland* (London, 1612); Aidan Clarke (ed.), "A Discourse between two councillors of State, the one of England, and the other of Ireland (1642)," *Analecta Hibernica* 26 (1970): 159-75. The

question and answer format is a variation on the dialogue. See for example Norah Carlin (ed.), *Certain Queries Propounded to the Consideration of such as were Intended for the Service in Ireland (1649)* (London: Aporia Press, 1992); Hiram Morgan (ed.), "A Booke of Questions and Answers concerning the Warrs or Rebellions of the Kingdome of Irelande (1597)," *Analecta Hibernica* 36 (1994): 93-153. One could also consider Lodowick Bryskett's *The Discourse of Civill Life*, in H. R. Plomer and T. P. Cross (eds.), *The Life and Correspondence of Lodowick Bryskett* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1927) 1-279. Richard Stanyhurst, the Dubliner, in his contribution to Holinshed's *Chronicles*, referred to the dialogue form as "a kind of writing as it is used, so commended of the learned." Cited in Edwin A. Greenlaw, "Spenser and British imperialism," *MP* 9 (1912) 12.

³Cited in Roger Fowler (ed.), *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* (London: Routledge, 1991) 59. Patricia Coughlan complicates the "dialogism" of the *View*: "It is true that the *View* lacks dialogicality in the sense of making two different registers of language confront each other. Both voices are, linguistically speaking, equally authoritative; both are standard users of official English; neither is lexically or syntactically a less adequate formulator of judgement or description. But this should not warrant any rash decision to write off the dialogue form, or assume it merely a decoy or mantle to conceal an absolute decisiveness." See Coughlan, "'Some secret scourge which shall by her come unto England'" 65-66.

⁴Bruce Avery, "Mapping the Irish Other: Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*," *ELH* 57 (1990) 264.

⁵Avery, "Mapping the Irish Other" 264.

⁶Breen, "Imagining Voices" 124.

⁷Breen, "Imagining Voices" 126.

⁸Kenneth Gross, "Mythmaking in Hibernia (*A View of the Present State of Ireland*)," *Spenserian Poetics: Idolatry, Iconoclasm, and Magic* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) 81.

⁹Ciarán Brady, "The Road to the *View*: On the Decline of Reform Thought in Tudor Ireland," *Spenser and Ireland*, ed. Coughlan, 41. Compare Andrew Hadfield, who writes: "The implied reader of the *View* is manipulated into accepting Irenius's arguments, which is why, I would argue, it was written as a dialogue." See Andrew Hadfield, "Spenser, Ireland, and Sixteenth-century Political Theory," *MLR* 9 (1994) 7.

¹⁰Helena Shire, *A Preface to Spenser* (London: Longman, 1978; 1981) 49-51.

¹¹Coughlan, "'Some secret scourge which shall by her come unto England'" 67.

¹²Coughlan, "'Some secret scourge which shall by her come unto England'" 71.

¹³Roland M. Smith, "Spenser's tale of the two sons of Milesio," *MLQ* 3 (1942) 554.

¹⁴Anne Fogarty, "The Colonization of Language: Narrative Strategy in *A View of the Present State of Ireland* and *The Faerie Queene*, Book VI," *Spenser and Ireland*, ed. Coughlan 83.

¹⁵Anne Fogarty, "The Colonization of Language" 104.

¹⁶Donald Bruce, "Edmund Spenser and the Irish Wars," *Contemporary Review* 266 (1995) 135-36.

¹⁷The arguments surrounding the apparent suppression of the *View* are incisively rehearsed in Andrew Hadfield, "Was Spenser's *View of the Present State of Ireland* Censored? A Review of the Evidence," *N&Q* 239 (1994): 459-63.

¹⁸Donald Bruce, "Spenser's Irenius and the nature of dialogue," *N&Q* n.s. 39 (1992): 355.

¹⁹John T. Day, "dialogue, prose," *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (London: Routledge, 1990) 217.

²⁰Thomas E. Wright, "Bryskett, Lodowick," *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. Hamilton 119.

²¹Day, "Dialogue, prose" 217.

²²Beverley Sherry, "Dialogue, poetic," *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. Hamilton 216.

²³Anne Fogarty, "The Colonization of Language: Narrative Strategy in *A View of the Present State of Ireland* and *The Faerie Queene*, Book VI," *Spenser and Ireland*, ed. Coughlan 76.

²⁴Ciarán Brady, "Spenser's Irish Crisis: Humanism and Experience in the 1590s," *Past and Present* 111 (1986) 18.

²⁵David J. Baker, "'Some Quirk, Some Subtle Evasion': Legal Subversion in Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*," *Spenser Studies* 6 (1986) 163.

²⁶Brady, "Spenser's Irish Crisis" 40.

²⁷See Hinton (ed.), "Rych's 'Anothomy of Ireland'" 91.

²⁸R. B. Gottfried, "Spenser's *View* and Essex," *PMLA* 52 (1937) 647.

²⁹Eva Gold, "Spenser the borderer: boundary, property, identity in *A View of the Present State of Ireland* and Book 6 of *The Faerie Queene*," *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association* 14 (1993): 105-06.

³⁰On self-fashioning and the construction of identity over and against an excluded Other, see Stephen Greenblatt, "To Fashion a Gentleman: Spenser and the Destruction of the Bower of Bliss," *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1980) 157-92.